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THE DIPLOMATIC MISSION
TO ABYSSINIA, 1903

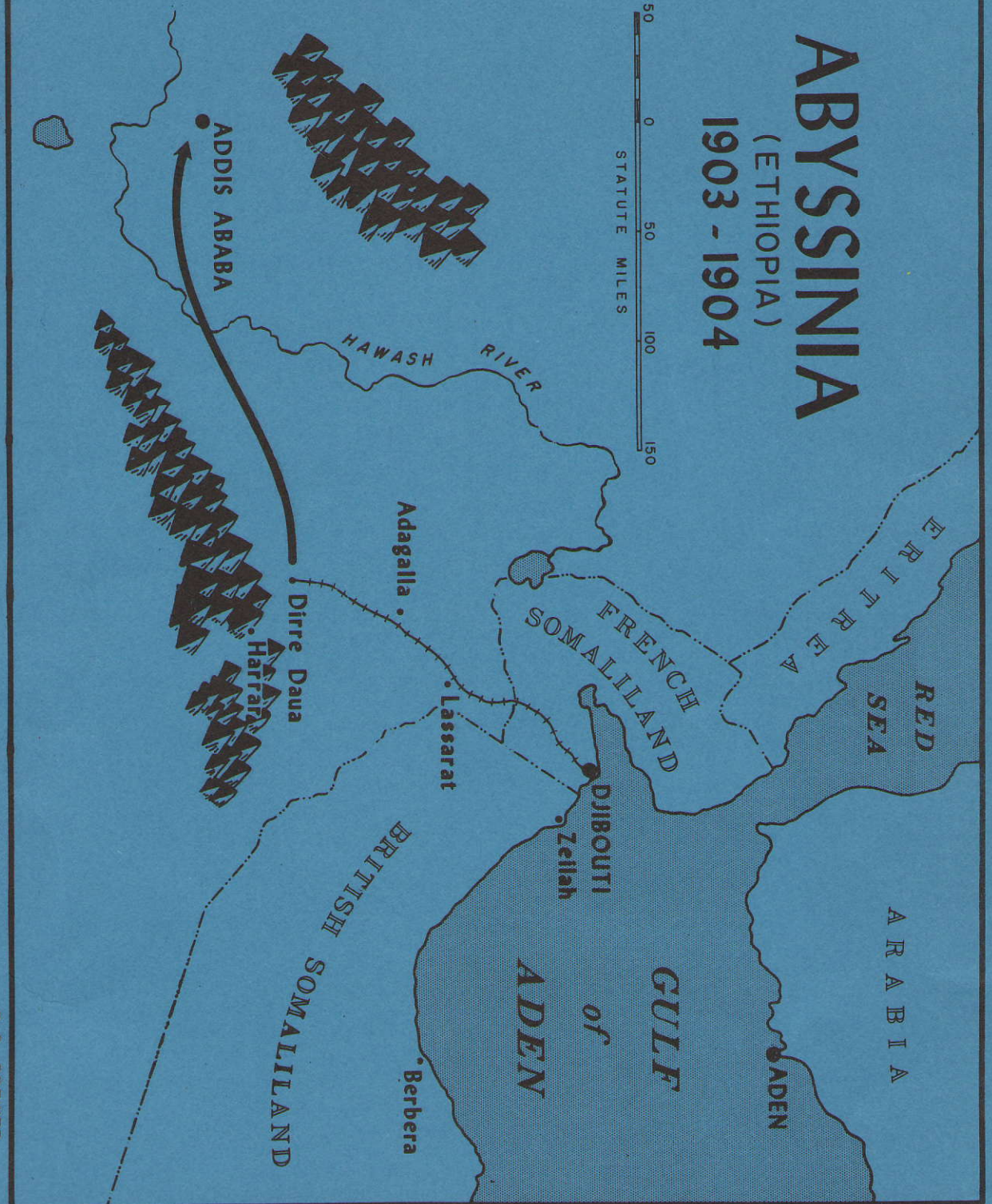


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THE DIPLOMATIC MISSION TO ABYSSINIA, 1903

By

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The plain seemed to spring to life as the morning sun struck the gaudy shields, gleaming spears, and glistening bodies of the mounted African warriors. Horses, mules, camels, and even zebras pranced and cavorted as the Abyssinian cavalry surged forward for a closer look at the paleskinned foreigners. Native officers flailed away with whip-like wands trying to hold their men in formation, but to no avail. A tidal wave of shouting humanity swept onward--Menelik II, Conquering Lion of Judah and Emperor of Abyssinia, was welcoming a band of American diplomats to his capital, Addis Ababa.⁽¹⁾ This tumultuous scene marked the climax of a 500-mile trek from Djibouti, French Somaliland over the rugged wastelands to the heart of Memelik's kingdom.

On 19 November 1903, at the dusty railhead of Dirre Dawa less than half way to Addis Ababa, Captain George C. Thorpe and 19 Marines climbed down from an ancient, creaking train. Here they met the jouncing mules which they would ride the rest of the way and saw the hulking camels which would carry their supplies. Commanded by Lieutenant Charles L. Hussey, USN, and reinforced by six bluejackets, they would guard the first American diplomatic mission to Abyssinia.⁽²⁾ The diplomats, under the able direction of Commissioner Robert P. Skinner, were to wangle from Memelik trade privileges similar to those he already had granted the French and Russians.⁽³⁾

Before pushing on to Addis Ababa, Commissioner Skinner wished to visit the town of Harrar where Ras Makonnen, Menelik's most trusted lieutenant, held sway. During the 32-mile jaunt, the Marines became excellent mule handlers. They had no choice, for Thorpe had decreed that any man whose mule broke down would have to take bridle in hand and lead the beast. A few minutes' care was an excellent investment on that dusty road to Harrar.⁽⁴⁾

Accompanied by a hundred warriors, Ras Makonnen, a thin, ascetic-looking man, met the Americans at the edge of town. The ruler himself led the way, a wooden wand 12 feet long clutched firmly in his hand. The unwary tribesman who wandered onto the road would snap to his senses when the stick came whistling down upon his head.⁽⁵⁾

At Harrar the Americans were quartered in a palace built by slaves, Italian soldiers captured in the war of 1896. Menelik himself had lived in the building; but when Satan himself took to haunting the royal bedchamber, the king had transferred his capital to Addis Ababa. Perhaps the devil felt a kinship with either diplomats or Marines; at any rate he did not put in an appearance during their stay.⁽⁶⁾

From Harrar the expedition returned to Dirre Dawa. Finally on 29 November the Americans started off toward the capital. They moved in three sections: an advance party led by Lieutenant Hussey, the main caravan, and a rear guard, four Marines and a sailor under Captain Thorpe. Naturally, each section had its share of camel drivers and guides.⁽⁷⁾

Selected to handle the camels were members of the Danakili tribe, reputed to be experts in dealing with the massive beasts. Camels, however, were a mere sideline with the Danakili; they lived for war. No member of the tribe might marry until he had killed and mutilated an enemy, and the number of wives he might keep depended upon the total number of victims. In addition, his first kill entitled the tribesman to wear an ostrich feather as a headdress. Needless to say, the Danakili needed no provocation to kill someone--especially a white man, whose life was equal to the lives of 10 natives in their peculiar scale of values. (8)

Since young Danakili eager to make their mark in the world had been known to lure unsuspecting whites into ambush, the Americans had to be especially careful. No wonder, then, that Thorpe became instantly alert when, on the morning of 30 November, he noticed that his guides were leading his men along a trail different from the one which Hussey's party had followed.

Immediately, Thorpe summoned the chief camel driver. After a heated argument, the savage whipped out a knife and began hacking away in Thorpe's direction. Once his weapon had been taken from him, the chieftain threw himself on the ground and began thrashing around like an angry child. As the Americans watched dumfounded, he jumped to his feet, seized a spear, and charged the Leathernecks. Disarmed a second time, the lanky native again lapsed into hysterics.

The situation seemed under control, as a loyal guide began tying the man's hands behind him; but in making fast the knot,

he flicked the end of the rope against a running sore on the prisoner's back. Galvanized by pain, he unleashed a soul-searing scream. With leveled spears, his followers advanced to his aid. Thorpe ordered his Marines to take cover behind their mules. Just as he was about to give the command to fire, the onrushing savages halted in their tracks and dropped their spears. Taking advantage of their indecision, the Captain cut loose with a barrage of threats and managed to bluff them into obedience. (9)

Now the Danakili tried a different tack. The chief camel driver, freed from his bonds, began complaining long and loud that he did not have enough men to care properly for so many camels. He sent to Eleye, 13 year old king of the tribe, for assistance, and additional Danakili came flocking to his aid. In Skinner's judgment there were far too many of them. True, each Marine had 175 rounds of ammunition, but that would be far too little if the caravan should have to fight its way back to Dirre Daa.

As their numbers increased, the tribesmen wandered closer to the American camp outside the village of Ellabella. Finally, on the afternoon of 3 December, a Marine sentry fired on two of the savages; the stage seemed set for a massacre. Near midnight, the babbling of strange voices came drifting into the camp. On a nearby hillside, grotesque figures could be seen moving about in the moonlight. Thorpe decided to attack, called for volunteers, and every man stepped forward. A detail of 15 Marines, rifles ready, formed a skirmish line and moved

up the hillside. Suddenly, the entire landscape exploded as an army of chattering, screaming monkeys fled from the oncoming Leathernecks.⁽¹⁰⁾

Although the Danakili still could be sullen when the spirit moved them, they gave up the idea of murder. They had gained a new respect for their employers. Perhaps a few rifle shots in their direction were all that was needed.

With danger had come discomfort--long hours in the saddle, brackish drinking water, and at times a diet of monkey meat roasted over fires of camel dung. But on 18 December, the Americans were rewarded with their first glimpse of Abyssinia's capital city. Before them loomed the awesome spectacle of Menelik's assembled host, a sight which set Captain Thorpe to contemplating Custer's Last Stand.⁽¹¹⁾ Now the work of diplomacy could begin.

Menelik, however, was unimpressed by the representatives of the State Department. His eyes drifted from their somber, black apparel to become wide with appreciation as he beheld the splendid, blue uniforms of the Marine guard. The Emperor was full of questions, but he did not speak of trade and treaties. He wanted to know the details of President Theodore Roosevelt's exploits at San Juan Hill, presumably to compare them to his own deeds in battle against the Italians.

When this first interview had ended, the Marines marched off to the palace where the American delegation was to be quartered. They pitched their tents in a spacious courtyard and promptly christened the area "Camp Roosevelt."

Within a few days, the Emperor visited Camp Roosevelt, but he went away a depressed man. The sight of tents smartly alined and men at rigid attention was too much for the monarch. As far as he was concerned, no troops were worth their pay unless they behaved like Abyssinians--that is unless they did what they pleased until an officer pommelled them with a stick.

Although aggrieved at Leatherneck discipline, the King was eager to examine an American rifle. Corporal Joseph A. Rossell (destined to become a Colonel, USMC) began demonstrating how to load and handle the weapon. No sooner had he slammed home the bolt than Menelik snatched the weapon from him and yanked the trigger. Fortunately the slug cracked over the heads of his most loyal subjects, and no one was injured. The incident, however, gave Menelik an excellent idea. He would blaze away at his officers in order to test their courage. Thorpe agreed to the scheme, but he insisted that the ruler use blank cartridges.⁽¹²⁾

After a formal banquet, at which wine was served in animal skin containers the size of bath tubs, Menelik agreed to sign the proffered treaty. As a token of his good will he sent as gifts for President Roosevelt two huge elephant tusks and two lion cubs. Except for their great weight, the tusks posed no problem; but the lions, held sacred by the Abyssinians, would plague Thorpe throughout the return trip.⁽¹³⁾

The Americans left Addis Ababa on 26 December.⁽¹⁴⁾ Each lion had been placed in a wooden cage and hoisted onto the back of a camel, but the scent of lion unnerved the camels.

Weaving wildly, the frightened beasts pitched their unwelcome burdens on the ground. The cages, of course, broke open; but the Abyssinian sovereign wisely had provided two animal keepers for just such an emergency, and the pair was recaptured.

To Thorpe's dismay, the battle between lion and camel was not yet ended. One camel grew meek and willingly shouldered his hated load, but the other remained as truculent as ever. Whether by accident or design, he so adjusted his swaying gait that the caged lion perched on his back became violently seasick. In desperation, the Captain called upon Hospital Steward William Fearnly for his expert aid. The cub resisted at first, clawing several men in the process, then gave in, bolted down his medicine, and promptly died. Menelik, upon learning of the animal's death, dispatched to President Roosevelt still another cub which eventually joined the survivor at Washington's Rock Creek Zoo. (15)

On 13 January 1904, the weary Marines arrived at Dirre Dawa. It had been 54 days since any of them had taken a bath, so Lieutenant Hussey decided to inspect his command to determine if anyone was afflicted with lice. The Lieutenant cut a gallant figure as he strode firmly from his tent, his neat beard trimmed to perfection. Suddenly, Hospital Steward Fearnly muttered his apologies, reached into the officer's Van Dyke, and extracted a large and lively louse. The inspection was cancelled. (16)

Two days later, the expedition reached Djiboute where, to everyone's relief, the mules were sold at public auction. (17) Never before had shipboard life seemed so good.

Every Marine who took part in the expedition, including two who became ill and were sent back to Dirre Dawa, received a decoration from Menelik. The medal consisted of a red, yellow, and green ribbon from which hung a gold pendant bearing a profile of the King. Years later, while a Captain at the Marine Barracks, Washington, Joseph Rossell made the mistake of wearing the decoration while a Masonic convention was meeting in town. He was mobbed by a phalanx of Masons, each of whom addressed him as "Potentate" and insisted upon shaking his hand. Red, yellow, and green, it seems, are also the colors of the Shriners. (18)

The trek to Addis Ababa had been a remarkable feat. To shepherd a small caravan through the lands of the fierce Danakili required the utmost in tact, courage, and discipline. More important, the expedition to Abyssinia shows that even at the turn of the century of Marine Corps could at short notice provide troops for almost any emergency. The same men who stood guard at Addis Ababa during December had landed at Beirut, Syria, in September to protect the American college from rioting Moslems. Even in 1903 the United States Marine Corps was a versatile, fast-moving organization.

NOTES

1. Washington Sunday Star, 17 Jan 1937, in Biography File: THORPE, George Cyrus, Marine Corps Historical Archives.
2. Thorpe to the Brigadier General Commandant, 30 Jan 1904, in Biography File: THORPE, George Cyrus, Marine Corps Historical Archives.
3. Robert P. Skinner, Abyssinia of Today (New York: Longman's Green, 1906), pp. 1-2.
4. Conversation with Col J. A. Rossell, 22 Jul 1959.
5. Skinner, op. cit., pp. 17-18.
6. Conversation with Col Rossell.
7. Ibid.; Thorpe to BGC, 30 Jan 1904, loc. cit.
8. Skinner, op. cit., p. 36.
9. Washington Sunday Star, 17 Jan 1937, loc. cit.
10. Skinner, op. cit., pp. 40-41.
11. Washington Sunday Star, 17 Jan 1937, loc. cit.
12. Conversation with Col Rossell; Washington Sunday Star, 24 Jan 1937, loc. cit.
13. Washington Sunday Star, 24 Jan 1937, loc. cit.
14. Thorpe to BGC, 30 Jan 1904, loc. cit.
15. Washington Sunday Star, 24 Jan 1937; conversation with Col Rossell; telephone conversation with Mr. David Johnson, National Museum, Washington, D. C.
16. Thorpe to BGC, 30 Jan 1904, loc. cit.; conversation with Col J. A. Rossell, 22 Jul 1959.
17. Thorpe to BGC, 30 Jan 1904, loc. cit.
18. Conversation with Col Rossell.